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James Casebere

picture show

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Given the constant stream of media images that filter through our daily lives, we know that things are not always what they seem. We are rational observers. We are capable of perceiving the difference between fact and fiction, reality and illusion. And yet we are so often seduced by the pleasure of looking, that we willingly suspend our disbelief. We negotiate between what we know to be true and what we desire to be real.

It is not surprising then that the emergence of the two most influential forms of media of the early modernist era was a direct result of a growing interest in perception and the role of the observer. As a model of human vision, the mechanical processes of the camera mark a radical shift in the means of pictorial reproduction. Rather than introducing any fundamental changes to established modes of representation, photography and cinematography have had a lasting impact on perception itself. The convincing pictorial illusion of the photographic image complicated our ability to differentiate between likeness and representation. Photography became synonymous with realism and so highly regarded for its ability to capture a "truthful moment" that the veracity of the photographic image is rarely questioned even today. Cinema, in its capacity to combine sight and sound with the illusion of space and time, extended the level of realism that could be achieved with film.

The enduring legacy of photography, coupled with the vast cultural influence of cinema, provides fertile ground for artists who came of age during the explosion of mass media in the latter half of the twentieth century. Picture Show is a series of exhibitions that explores a genre of photography that has emerged over the past 30 years and challenged presumptions about the photographic image, specifically its capacity to represent an unmitigated reality. The artists featured in the series take the approach that photography is not exclusively about "seeing" so much as it is about rendering what they have imagined visible. Taking their cues from films and filmmakers of the past century, these artists go to great lengths to stage what appears to be a fleeting moment but which ultimately reveals itself to be not unlike that of a film still: cinematic fantasy disguised in pictorial realism.

Since the mid-1970s, James Casebere has photographed tabletop-sized models that he constructs with styrofoam, paper and plaster. The precise and complex models are based on real and imagined landscapes and architecture ranging from the Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary to Jefferson's Monticello and the Nevisian Underground. In the artist's studio, the models are dramatically lit, sometimes painted, deliberately photographed from various points of view, and then abandoned. The photographs are Casebere's representation of his own construction, a re-construction and re-presentation of the artist's own rendering. Consequently, we are farther removed from any reference to reality than we might presume. The illusion is so alluring. Casebere's most recent photographs are enlarged to such an extent as to make the structures appear life size. Standing before them it is as if we can step into the space. The notion that these may be actual places seems plausible, as "concrete" as the walls of a prison cell.

As with any illusory image, the internal structure of Casebere's images supports, props up if you will, the intangible qualities that seem so palpable at first glance. The studio lamplight appears ethereal through the crafted windows. Where light strikes a floor or reflects off water, it affirms a corporeal presence, as if this water were flowing through centuries old architecture. The austere beauty is spectacular in and of itself – so seductive that the observer may be unwilling to expose it, wanting to believe that it could be real. Ironically, this infatuation distances the observer, preventing him or her from recognizing any facade. Is this not cinematic?

While there is no apparent correlation to any scripted narrative, the images do seem to allude to a past, present and future. An anxious observer imagines a human story within the abandoned spaces. The lack of any human presence leads us to anticipate an arrival or wonder what has happened here. To further compound this effect, these are not necessarily abstract, nameless spaces. Instead, they appear to be actual places and, for that matter, places of vast historical or cultural significance. There is human drama embedded in these places. How does one reconcile this with the fact that these spaces are fabricated? With any knowledge of the purpose these spaces, these institutions, served, how do we reconcile this with the fact that the artist went so far as to precisely simulate something so literally and figuratively substantial?

In so many ways, Casebere's work sets the stage for the whole of the exhibition series, offering a compelling look into the connection between the perception of reality and the virtual realm of photography.

Douglas Bohr, curator

Q&A with James Casebere

DB - How has film, and cinematography in particular, influenced your work?

JC - I am part of the first generation of artists to really grow up with television. While coming of age with conceptual art in the mid-70s I was also influenced by pop culture and vernacular architecture. I wanted to make art that appealed to a wider audience - that entertained, cajoled and seduced, much like TV and the movies. Jean Luc Godard was the critical voice in one ear and Spielberg the bad seed in the other. **When it comes to cinematography, I can only really mention directors like Eisenstein, Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Douglas Sirk, and Nicholas Ray, etc. In as much as I am part of the "Pictures" generation or the group of photo-based artists that gathered around Artists Space and Metro Pictures Gallery in the late seventies and early eighties, people like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, etc., it was part of my goal to integrate the way film, and I suppose cinematography had wormed its way into our collective visual language as a culture. I wanted to bring that awareness to bear on my interest in architecture,**



design, sculpture, and even painting. Many of the best cinematographers have no doubt borrowed from the language of painting. One major affinity I have with cinematographers is the concern with light. Light and shadow are the raw materials for both of us. It would be a serious omission not to mention this concern. There are many times I have looked to film (as well as painting, as in Rembrandt, Vermeer, Caravaggio, Hopper) with an interest in the way the filmmaker, or the cinematographer uses light: Spielberg, of course in such an emotional way; Kubrick in "Barry Lyndon," for example; and Hawks in "Only Angels Have Wings" where the use of fog is amazing. I would also mention the dramatic shadows of Orson Welles. And then, there are more self-conscious examples, as with Francis Ford Coppola's "Rumble Fish." Unfortunately, I am still a victim of the "auteur" theory of film and have rarely separated the cinematographer from the director, and been able to give credit where credit is due by naming the cameraman as well.

DB - Are your images, or any specific series of images, directly influenced by a specific style of cinematography or filmmaking?

JC - "Desert House with Cactus" was supposed to be about the sense of exile, but when I added the guard tower it really snapped into place. I was thinking of "Hogan's Heroes." "Boats" was partly based on Hitchcock's "Lifeboat." "Covered Wagons" was based on a scene from "Red River." In a lot of my earlier black and white photos there is a Hopper-like feeling akin to film noir - alone in the big city. **The whole series of Western images were about the Hollywood version of the west not as history, but as myth. When I was making "Street with Pots," I was thinking about Hitchcock's "The Birds." My idea was to keep adding pots until they had a collective subliminal effect**

akin to the quantity of birds gathering ominously about town. In the prison work I got away from film to think more about the basics of picture making and the depiction of space and light in a more modernist sense. More recently I added color, texture, movement, and reflection, all of which contribute to the sense of realism, but might also suggest film. This is done without quoting from particular movies like I did before.

DB - The act of fabricating architectural models and dramatically lighting them in order to photograph (film) them is like stage or set design. Does the fact that your images are primarily about space - particularly open, architectonic space, where there is no human drama let alone presence - imply a stage of sorts?

JC - I think so. The stage designer is trying to do the same thing as I am, in trying to create a sense of place simply, with as few elements as possible. Again, in the late 70's I produced a series of ten images that worked together and were really about editing. I made a storyboard, sketching out each image ahead of time and then, using cut paper and cardboard, built simple models for each sketch. There was a narrative movement throughout the group. I also made a short pixilated film and another film loop installation. However, the point is that after this work I wanted to concentrate on a single autonomous image, getting everything into it, imply action, story, etc. I never really had any actors. The idea was always to get the viewer to enter the image, somehow, to be the actor. In order to do that I reduce the image to its basics, to generic forms, or archetypal forms. In some respects Beckett was the model for this kind of anonymity. His characters were the stripped down "everyman" that I sought to build contemporary images up around.

DB - How does the scale or size of the image affect this idea of a stage?

JC - I think of the scale as being about the space of exhibition. It's about human scale, about being able to enter the space. "It's about your knees as well as your head" as a viewer (Joe McKay, interactive video, computer artist). I have tried to deal with the space of the gallery and the way the viewer moves through that space rather than mimicking film, opera, theater, etc. At one point my work began to get less narrative and more iconic. Through water - its movement and reflection - a kind of narrative is re-introduced. Movement implies time. Sometimes I will now shoot more than one perspective of the same model and show the different works in the same space in an attempt to move the viewer through the space of the gallery, and move them through the space of the images at the same time.

DB - You have stated that it is essential that the fact that these images are photographs of fabricated models be revealed within the image itself - that the seams and such are apparent. Why?

JC - **My attitude about that has changed over time. I used to believe exactly what you described. With the prison interiors it became more ambiguous. Sometimes when I look at them they look like cartoons, and sometimes they're more convincing. Sometimes letting the seams and rough edges show makes them at first glance look more real. I like that confusion - the ambiguity. At the moment I'm more interested in that area between the recognition of something as real, and the eventual suspicion that it's not. Give me the illusion first, and let me keep it if I can.**

DB - The ethereal quality of light in images such as "Empty Room," "Asylum" and "Arcade" from the prison series, lends an otherworldly sense to the scene. Could you comment on the role beauty plays in your work?

JC - Part of what I am trying to do now is give pleasure. With the earlier work there was a constructivist ethic at work that required that the way it's made be made evident. Seeing how it's made allows for critical distance. Hiding that or concealing that within the sense of wonder is perhaps more like what I am trying to do now. Truly great art is always breathtaking, no matter how complex, no matter how sophisticated, no matter how thoughtful, or entertaining. Great art should grab you in the solar plexus. It should take one's breath away. Of course, a simple idea can be beautiful in itself. However, critical distance can also sometimes mitigate against this. It took me a long time to accept this idea. Visual art can be thoughtful. Indeed it should be both thoughtful and beautiful at the same time. (See Edmund Burke.) This is really about the connection between body and mind, or both sense and intellect.

DB - The fact that we can sense that the architecture may not be "real" distances us from the image and we become aware of the fact that we are yet another step removed from "reality." In terms of its effect on the observer, what do you think it means to have the photographic image so far removed from a source, be it your imagination or the artist's observation of an actual place, so much so that the observer can sense that the model somehow mediates between the artist's original vision and the representation of that vision?

JC - The final image is not exactly a representation of my original vision. It takes on a life of its own in the process of its making. If I'm happy with it in the end it's because of what it's become in the process, not because it approximates what I set out to produce originally. If it works really well, then it's usually a big surprise. On the other hand, I never intended to distance the viewer from reality. There is no objective reality that is a reference for this work. To borrow a term from Gregory Bateson, I like to think of these images as being about the "Interaction of Ideas."

DB - You deliberately create a sense that there are multiple levels of interpretation between the observer and the original source throughout the process of making the images. I can't help but think of the notion of time. Is this a way that time is somehow a constructive element in a still image? How do you think of time in regard to your pictures?

JC - Inevitably, the subject is in part the time it takes to build the model. In the prison images, the time making the model almost ritualistically mimics the time of internment. On the positive side, the solitude implied also suggests the passage of time as a desirable experience. The flooded works are perhaps more about the passage of historic time than about the loss of historic memory. From another angle, in as much as the models are very fragile and temporary things, I suppose the loss or destruction of the places depicted doubly emphasizes their transitory nature.

Sources/Suggested Reading

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07 Tunnels 1996

08 Parlor 2001

09 Four Flooded Arches from Right with Fog 1999 (detail)







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Exhibition Checklist

all works courtesy of the artist and
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York,
New York, unless otherwise noted

Parlor

2001
digital chromogenic print
92 X 122 inches

Nevisian Underground #2

2001
digital chromogenic print
96 X 77 inches

Nevisian Underground #3

2001
digital chromogenic print
96 X 77 inches
Collection of the Rose Art Museum,
Brandeis University, Waltham,
Massachusetts
Rose Purchase Fund.

Pink Hallway #3

2000
digital chromogenic print
96 X 77 inches

Blue Hallway

2000
digital chromogenic print
96 X 77 inches

Four Flooded Arches from Right with Fog

1999
dye destruction print
96 X 77 inches

Four Flooded Arches from Left

1999
dye destruction print
96 X 77 inches

Flooded Hallway

1998-99
dye destruction print
92 X 117 inches

Converging Hallways from Left

1997
dye destruction print
48 X 60 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

A Barrel Vaulted Room

1994
dye destruction print
60 X 48 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Tunnels

1995
dye destruction print
48 X 60 inches
Collection of A.G. Rosen,
New Jersey

Arcade

1995
dye destruction print
60 X 48 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Asylum

1994
dye destruction print
48 X 60 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Empty Room

1994
dye destruction print
48 X 60 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

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Cover: Empty Room 1994 (detail)

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